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Let's Fight Stigma

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It seems that every day's news brings us stories about horrible crimes that are committed without apparent reason. We want to ascribe a reason to things, an explanation in terms of cause and effect. And for seemingly inexplicable crimes, we naturally want to assume the perpetrator had a mental health disorder, because it doesn't appear to be rational to assault someone without reason or to go on a killing spree.

We need to remember that people who don't have mental health disorders sometimes act irrationally, too.

The majority of people with mental illness in the community are not violent and are not more likely to commit violent crimes than non-mentally ill people. The truth is that people who are mentally ill are more likely to be the victims of crime than to harm others.

People with mental illness are parents, siblings, friends and neighbors, who, with help, can get treated for their illness, and who, like all of us, have good days and bad days.

Mental illnesses are physical illnesses, like cancer, diabetes or arthritis. They can be treated with medication, peer support and counseling. Most people with mental illnesses go on to live fulfilling, productive lives.

There is a great deal of stigma in our society attached to having a mental illness. That is one reason many people do not seek treatment. (For a great video addressing stigma, directed by Ron Howard, go to <http://www.bringchange2mind.org/> .)

May is Mental Health Month. Let's make it so that prejudice and discrimination, the products of stigma, have no place in our society.